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My name is Susan K. McKnight and I am the Vice President of Quality Flow, Inc. (QFI) of Northbrook, IL. QFI has had over 15 years of experience in developing water treatment solutions for America's food service industry. As an independent consultant, QFI works with companies whose businesses depend on the quality of the water they use. We belong to the Water Quality Association (WQA), where I serve as chair of the Education Committee and my partner serves on the Science Advisory Committee. QFI is also a member of the American Water Works Association (AWWA) and currently serves on Underwriter Laboratories newly formed Water Industry/User Advisory Group.

The vision statement proposed by the President's Food Safety Council for the US food safety system is one where "Consumers can be confident that food is safe, healthy and affordable. Food is safe because everyone understands and accepts their responsibilities." **Who is responsible for the quality of the water for the beverages prepared in a restaurant?** The question of responsibility for water quality at a restaurant is often unknown. A restaurant chain's food safety staff may understand the issue but it is seldom acknowledged by senior level management or at the day-to-day operator level.

Media coverage has made food safety issues a top priority with the restaurant industry, according to the National Restaurant Association's June/July 1998 issue of Restaurants*USA. However, a missing ingredient in the national food safety system is an awareness of the role that water quality plays in food safety. When dining out, a consumer almost always drinks a beverage. Most restaurant beverages are prepared on site and consist mainly of water, mixed with something else (i.e. - syrup, coffee, tea). It is impossible to know if the water used to create a beverage is free of any contaminants, without testing the quality of the water supply at a given location.

The Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) of 1996 requires municipalities to prepare and issue Consumer Confidence Reports (CCRs), or water quality reports, in 1999. This will for the first time, give consumers immediate and easy access to information about their local water supply. The January 1997 EPA Drinking Water Infrastructure Needs Survey indicated millions of dollars are needed to upgrade community water systems to meet current SDWA requirements. Water quality will become an even greater issue, with no inexpensive answers.

Restaurants, however, continue to prepare beverages on site, unaware of the quality of the water at their location. **Most restaurant owners assume the municipally supplied water quality is fine and believe it is the responsibility of the municipality if a water problem should occur.** They are unaware the FDA Food Code requires the use of “potable” water and periodic water testing in compliance with the USEPA drinking water standards. Since there is currently no routine enforcement of this aspect of the Food Code, this area of food safety is unchecked. According to just one fast-food chain’s web site, they serve 13.2 million customers a day. I think it is safe to say, **beverage safety** can impact millions of Americans each day.

The CEO’s and senior management of restaurant chains need to hear from the government what a restaurant operator’s responsibility is in beverage quality and preparation. All chains want to promote food safety but are balancing exactly what is required with “what is a nice thing to do”. Often, the only motivation to take action occurs when the possibilities of the threat of sick bodies at the door or lawsuits occur.

There are many ways drinking water quality can affect the food service industry. One example is when a “boil water alert” occurs. Only state and local officials are in the information loop during these alerts. Yet, a restaurant preparing beverages in a town that has a boil water alert needs to know about the problem **before** they open for business or continue preparing beverages on-site. y firm manages a water quality program for a chain restaurant They have asked QFI to set up a notification system for their restaurants, because they want to be proactive rather than reactive to water safety issues. Usually the parent company finds out about the alert days after the event and is playing catch-up when the public safety has already been compromised. There is no national, state or local notification system of boil water alerts that will accommodate a private firm being included in the information loop. However, the sooner a restaurant knows about such an event, it can take action to help protect the public health.

A multiple barrier approach should be implemented to protect the public when beverages prepared on-site are sold. As stated earlier, the Federal government is proposing in the 1996 SDWA significant investments be made to install, upgrade or replace infrastructure to ensure the provision of safe drinking water to consumers. Some of the major restaurant chains are using water treatment equipment at the point-of-use (POU) to prevent short and long term exposure to water-borne problems. Many water treatment products have received independent third party certification by either NSF International (NSF) or Underwriters Laboratories (UL) to handle such problems as **Cryptosporidium** in drinking water.

Food safety goes from farm-to-table and must include water quality safety from the source to the glass.

In **summary**, I would like the Council to consider the following:

1. Water is the primary and sometimes only ingredient in beverages prepared in a restaurant. Please recognize drinking water quality as a major food safety issue and prominently include it in the Council's discussion.
2. Government agencies must clearly define who has the responsibility for the water quality in beverage preparation - state or local authorities, or the end-user.
3. The information loop must be expanded in outbreak alerts to include private firms who have a safety role to fulfill.
4. This Council should consider recommending the Best Available Technology (BAT) in POU water treatment industry with valid third party (UL or NSF) certification be considered as an acceptable, cost-effective preventative measure in on-site beverage preparation.

Submitted by:

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October 2, 1998
Arlington, VA
President's Council on Food Safety
Food Safety Strategic Plan